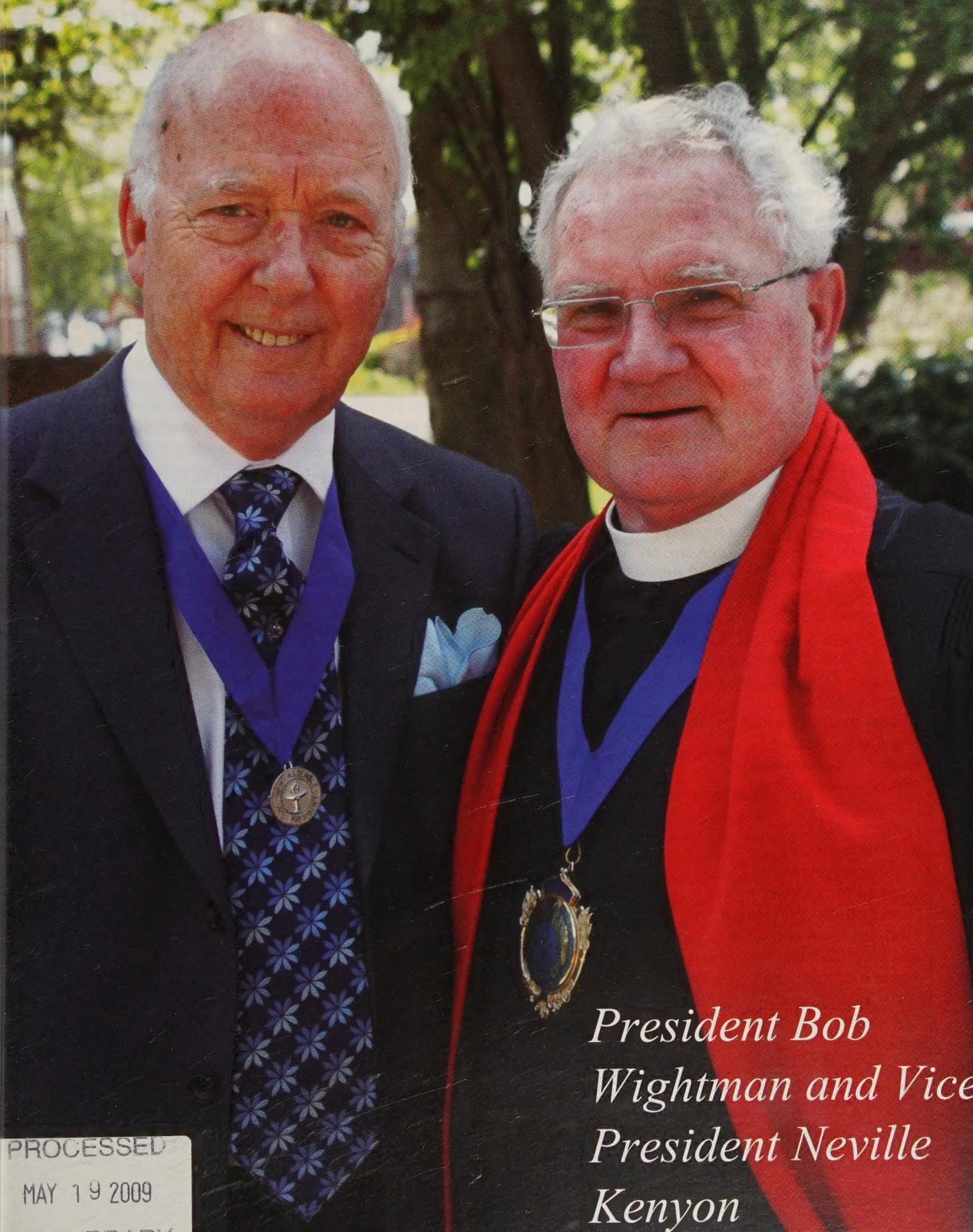


The INQUIRER

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70p

The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7722 16 May 2009



*President Bob
Wightman and Vice
President Neville
Kenyon*

PROCESSED

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The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest
Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

From the Object passed at the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches 2001

The Inquirer is published fortnightly by The Inquirer Publishing Company (2004), Registered Charity 1101039.

Articles express the views of their authors. Submissions are welcome and may be edited for content and length. They should be emailed or typed and should be the author's original work or be attributed appropriately.

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Annual subscriptions are £25.

Cheques payable to The Inquirer.

Advertise for £6 per column cm, on 3-col page, plus VAT or £7.50 per col cm, on a 2-col page. A one-page supplement is £200. One column on a 2-col page is £100, on a 3-col page, £75. A5 fliers may be inserted for £70 plus VAT. Deadlines are available from the editor.

Births, marriages and deaths are 50p a word plus VAT.

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The General Assembly

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Inquiring Words

Spirit of loving, God of many names, life-force beyond all words,

We come to this place of gathering to join in fellowship with those who share our dream of expanding the Unitarian vision. We have devoted our energies and time to this work because we know of its potential

– the ways in which its open-minded and open-hearted message can heal individuals, build loving communities, and foster peace.

Many of us have felt this healing power on our journey of faith, and our memories and discoveries propel us forward.

Spirit of truth-telling,

Forgive us our frailties and failings.

Take from us the burdens that divide us: the cravings for control and status; the fear that comes with change; the impatience that appears when we are confronted by our own imperfections or those of others.

Spirit of hoping

Grant us generosity of spirit – that we may yearn to share our faith widely,

Strengthen our hands to hold one another firm despite hardships, misunderstandings, and resentments, to stand united despite all that pulls us apart.

Inspire us with purpose – and may we find the sustenance to carry us beyond the obstacles we face both within and beyond ourselves.

Give us the insight and the patience to learn the ways of each others' hearts,

And fill us with love – for one another, for our movement, for our communities, and for the vast human village we belong to. May we teach each other how to touch the world with our shared vision of one-ness, respect for diversity and difference and freedom of faith.

Amen.

— *Prayer by Andy Pakula and John Harley
Spoken at the General Assembly Anniversary Service.*

With thanks

This full-colour issue of *The Inquirer* was paid for by the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

Dundee minister is GA president

Announcing that he wants to raise the Unitarian profile while emphasising ministry in all congregations, '**Rev Bob**' **Wightman** takes up the GA presidency

Radio Tay presenter the Rev Bob Wightman, who is minister at Williamson Memorial Unitarian Christian Church, Dundee, became the president of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches at the GA meetings held in Chester.

Bob, who was formerly a Congregational minister, moved to Unitarianism in the 1990s. He became lay-person-in-charge at the Williamson Memorial Unitarian Christian Church in Dundee in November 1995, underwent training for the Unitarian ministry from 1997-1999 and has been the minister at the Dundee church since 1999.

'I was drawn to Unitarianism,' Bob says, 'after I had been invited to conduct a service of worship in a Unitarian chapel. I enjoyed the freedom of the pulpit that, as a gathered fellowship, we could have tolerance for each, even when we all had a different way of believing in God (He or She). Most of all we were, and still are, a gathered community and willing to fight the cause for civil liberty the world over.'

A colourful and ebullient figure, Bob has had a varied career, working for 18 years in the motor trade in sales and marketing and also having his own business, before reading theology studies at the Congregational College and the University of Edinburgh. In 1979 he became minister at Priesthill Congregational Church, Glasgow, an area of multi-deprivation. Here he was involved in the running of a resource centre which included an alcohol unit, a bereavement centre, a citizens' advice centre, a drug unit and a unit for women's aid. He moved to Dundee in 1985 and spent nine years as the Minister at Gilfillan Memorial Church.

At present he holds the position of Chaplain to the City of



The Wightman family gathered at Chester when the Rev Bob Wightman was installed as GA president. Photos by John Hewardine

Dundee Combined Ex-Services a post he has held for around 18 years.

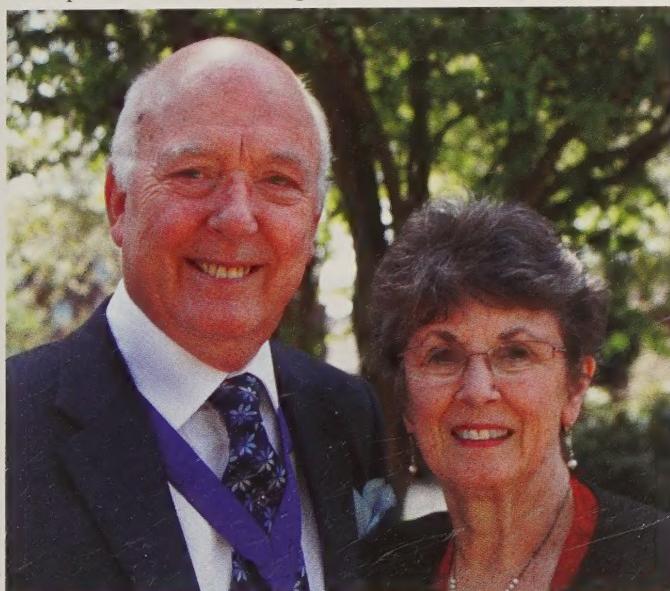
At Dundee, Bob took up the post, which he still holds, of religious presenter and producer with Radio Tay and has also participated on "Thought for the Day" on the Terry Wogan Show on Radio 2.

Now widely known amongst Unitarians, Bob is past president of the Scottish Unitarian Association and was a member of the Executive Committee and is currently convenor of the future ministry panel.

Bob's ambitions as president are to make the denomination far more 'media-savvy', to develop a strategy to attract young people to Unitarianism, and to see every church, chapel or fellowship being ministered to by their own individual spiritual leader.

In his capacity as vice president during 2008-9, Bob attended meetings of the denomination's Executive Committee, and the valedictory Service and Governors' meeting at Unitarian College, Manchester. He was also involved in the Induction Service at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, of the Rev Jane Barraclough on behalf of the president as well as conducting services at various places of worship throughout the denomination. He has been heavily involved as convenor of the future ministry of the denomination over the past year.

In his personal life he has been happily married for 40 years to Mary, who is national president of the Women's League. He has two sons Colin and David who are also happily married to Melanie and Jacqueline respectively. There is not a lot of time in his busy life for hobbies. However, when the opportunity arises, he does enjoy going along to support the local football team. His ambition in life is to purchase an old classic car and restore it to its former glory – but Unitarians come first.



GA Vice President Neville Kenyon and Betty Kenyon

'I am overwhelmed by this great honour. Never, in my wildest dreams, did I think you would bestow this on me.'

– '**Rev Bob**' Wightman

GA 'hangover'

'Never again' – until Nottingham 2010

By Ant Howe

The alarm clock rings on Sunday morning and I smack the snooze button hoping for an extra 10 minutes of sleep. My head is pounding and I whisper a silent promise "never again"!

You might be forgiven for thinking that I was recovering from a Saturday night of over-indulgence, but no! This is just the natural post-Annual Meetings feeling!

Days of meetings, socialising, worship and workshops have taken their toll, but I know that 12 months from now I will break my "never again" promise and go to Nottingham where the next Annual Meetings of the General Assembly are to be held.

I, for one, am glad that we won't be at Chester again next year. I couldn't help but think that the campus was looking a little tired. The Molloy Hall felt very stuffy at times and lots of people were remarking about the wafer-thin pillows in the bedrooms.

This year's business meetings were expertly presided over by Joyce Ashworth. The affection for Joyce and the high esteem which she is so obviously held in was very evident at the meetings; it's clear she has been one of our most popular GA Presidents.

I'm sure *The Inquirer* will report on the resolutions passed in detail, but I will say that the business meetings themselves seemed to execute themselves smoothly. Peter Soulsby did make a brief statement at the start of the meetings regarding the departure of the chief executive – mainly to the effect that these meetings were not an appropriate forum to discuss it – and this probably saved a lot of speculation in the business meetings themselves. Several people did express their gratitude to the Rev Steve Dick at different points in the proceedings.

The second Growth and Renewal Day took place. The highlight for me was listening to the Rev Jane Dwinell, a Unitarian Universalist minister from the US who has ministered to smaller congregations and helped them to grow. Her talk was packed with practical suggestions as to how we might encourage growth in our congregations. One of her key points was that congregations should offer some sort of worship service or activity at the same time *every week*. This would be a big change for many of our congregations who worship on 1st and 3rd Sundays etc.

We started and ended our gathering with worship (and of course worshipped on many occasions in-between). The open-



GA President Joyce Ashworth and Executive Committee Convenor Peter Soulsby expertly presided over the business sessions. Photo by John Hewerdine

ing celebrations were led by the Rev Celia Midgley and friends. Taking up the theme of valuing and supporting our ministers, this worship service allowed several ministers to share what ministry meant to them and gave us all a chance to remember much-loved ministers from years past. I, for one, want to express my thanks to all those who gave of themselves to ensure that we had opportunities to worship together.

The highlight of the meetings for many is the Anniversary Service. This year it was led by the Rev John Harley and the preacher was the Rev Margaret Kirk. In her sermon, Margaret reminded us that the most important feature of our common life is connection. She spoke of the walls that can divide us if we are not careful. Her sermon was inspiring, and David Dawson did a wonderful job once again of blending together a fantastic sounding choir after just a few half hour rehearsals. We were also treated to music on clarinet and piano. The

gathered congregation sang heartily the two very well known hymns, as well as the two we sang which appear in the new hymn book *Sing Your Faith*. I'm not at all sure about the quality of the pianist for the hymns, but then I've always been quite self critical!!!!

Other highlights included the social night. An 'Abba' tribute band had been booked and the dance floor was full of Unitarians of all ages. I'm told some carried on until the early hours! This social night also gave us a chance to thank Martin West for his wonderful work as honorary treasurer of the General Assembly. His work over the last few years is universally appreciated throughout our movement.

The final day saw changes on the Executive Committee. Retiring members left the stage as new ones arrived to take their place. The GA presidency passed to the Rev Bob Wightman who articulated his love for our movement and his hope that we will become more skilled at using the media to promote ourselves.

I'm sure lots will be written about the meetings – this is just a very brief over-view.

I want to finish by mentioning the wonderful work of the Essex Hall staff. Their hard work and dedication ensured the event was a success. They got a well-deserved standing ovation in recognition and thanks.

The Rev Ant Howe is minister with Kingswood Warwick Unitarians.

Presidential year comes to a close

Joyce Ashworth's final speech as General Assembly president.

This has truly been an amazing year for me and one which I know I will look back on time and again to savour so many really special moments.

I have taken more services of worship than I honestly thought myself capable of in any single year and in doing so have visited 23 Unitarian churches I had not previously set foot inside.

It has been wonderful to share so many important celebrations in the lives of Unitarians up and down the country. Amongst those were notable church anniversaries, ranging literally from a first anniversary to no less than three tercentenaries, part of the celebrations for one of those included a visit by the Duke of Gloucester; the 100th anniversary lunch of the national Women's League; recognition of special personal birthdays of congregational members – a 100th, a 90th, an 80th and – in total contrast – a most beautiful "coming of age" service. I have also been called upon to make numerous presentations: to Unitarians for notable service – how about 58 years as church secretary, or the presentation of five gold chalice awards within one congregation? That certainly represents commitment and dedication on the part of young people but also their teachers. Unitarians are champions at money-raising and I have been delighted to present cheques for considerable amounts to both national and locally-based charities.

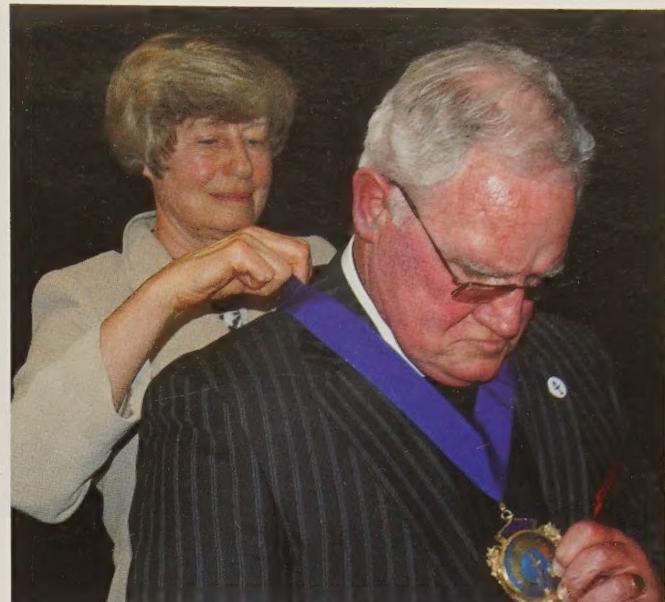
I have managed to attend, speak or run workshops at district gatherings for all but one of our districts and arrangements are in hand to remedy that very soon, and I have made a real effort when visiting a district to take part in as many other Unitarian activities occurring within a similar time frame, and those have invariably proved especially rewarding.

I was called upon to take part in three induction services and, encouragingly, two of those were first ministry inductions and I will continue to follow those ministries with especial interest. Inevitably there have also been funerals to attend and tributes to extend – six during the year and all well-loved Unitarian figures, each of whom made their unique contribution to this movement. And, of course there was the very moving ceremony in Whitehall on Armistice Sunday, where I felt so very proud to be your representative.

It has been my great good fortune to travel abroad on three occasions during my presidential year. Firstly to attend the Canadian Annual Meetings in Ottawa, which were hugely inspiring and where I learned so much that I would like us to adapt and introduce here over the next few years. By way of a break from duties, I took an adventurous holiday in Africa last sum-

'The one thing that will remain with me always is the warmth and generosity of the hospitality I have received and the camaraderie and the joyful fun I have been privileged to share in the informal moments with so many Unitarians.'

– Joyce Ashworth



Joyce Ashworth places the medallion of office on the Rev Bob Wightman. Photo by John Hewerdine

mer and managed to combine with that a visit to the Unitarian church in Cape Town, leading worship on one Sunday and attending as a member of the congregation on another and I was also able to visit and speak to a gathering of the Unitarian Fellowship on the Western Cape. My presidency culminated with a short but memorable visit to Transylvania for the wonderful occasion of the installation of the new bishop in the Unitarian Church in the Unitarian church in Kolozsvár.

People have asked me what I consider the highlight of my year, and I find it difficult to single out one particular event, but by far the most encouraging thing I have noted, is the considerable number of services I have been involved in where there was someone attending a Unitarian service for the first time. Be assured, people are finding us.

I am certain every president before me has cherished hopes that there might be some legacy for the movement from their presidency. I leave this year with incredible positive energy which I shall endeavour to channel into ways which will benefit our denomination for the future. As a first step I hope you will feel able to go back to your congregations and encourage them to support me financially in the walk I will embark on in June. For details of this walk, or how to sponsor me, contact me on joyce.ashworth@btinternet.com

Congregations will also receive details in the next GA mailing. The project has yet to take real shape, but I promise you that all the money raised will be used for growth initiatives.

It is impossible in the five minutes allowed to convey all that this year has meant to me, but the one thing that will remain with me always is the warmth and generosity of the hospitality I have received and the camaraderie and the joyful fun I have been privileged to share in the informal moments with so many Unitarians. I trust I have left with you, something of lasting value, for I have invariably come away from engagements with my spirits lifted. It has indeed been the greatest honour and privilege to serve you as President during the past year, and I thank you wholeheartedly.

Joyce Ashworth is a member of the Rochdale congregation.

Ministers need practical support

By Michael Allured

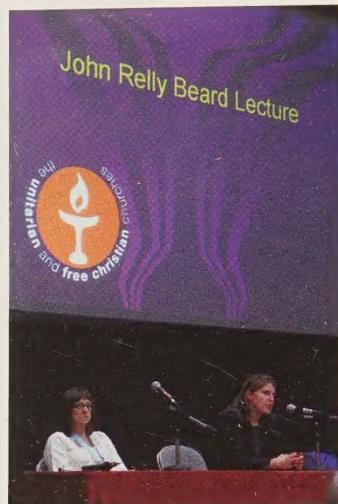
The John Relly Beard Lecture at the 2009 Annual Meetings set the scene for this year's conference theme: supporting ministers. Rachael Maskell, the National Officer of the Faith Workers' Branch of the trade union Unite, spoke to us about its mission to support professional ministers in their ministry through promoting fairness and dignity at work, equality of treatment and opportunity and a commitment to working for proper recognition and support for all faith workers.

There is no other job quite like being a professional minister. Often, for a whole variety of reasons, so much is expected of ministers – and increasingly lay leaders – from their congregations and society more widely. Ministry is a unique calling and something to which some are powerfully drawn. But it is a demanding path and can be a lonely one. Who then ministers to our ministers, particularly when things go wrong? Unite works to provide that support.

Rachael explained that the Faith Workers' Branch had been established for around 15 years after a number of Anglican priests approached the union to establish a group which would provide support for ministers of religion. Over that time Unite has built many specialist services to provide advice and representation to nearly 2,500 members from different faiths, both individually and collectively, and to help achieve greater transparency, clearer processes and fair treatment of faith workers.

'Ministers joining trade unions?' Some may think 'Whatever next?' Yet the ties between religion and trade unionism are by no means new. Rachael drew our attention links going back to monastic times and to the 19th century Tolpuddle Martyrs. Is it not reasonable therefore for ministers to have the protection secured over centuries for people in any workplace?

So much of the story of the trade union movement is about the struggles of workers for fair treatment and decent condi-



The Rev Celia Cartwright and (r) Rachael Maskell

tions. It was an education to hear some of the individual stories of faith workers from different parts of the world whom Unite had been able to help. We heard that in Colombia 260 faith workers had received death threats in 2008 and that in Zimbabwe there were reports of women being raped by their bosses. Tabatha from Zimbabwe had suffered this terrible ordeal along with repeated beatings.

There were also some horror stories which came from the United Kingdom of crumbling churches and unsafe pulpit structures and of a minister and his family being subjected to community abuse and forced to reside in a collapsing house where wet rot had exposed deadly asbestos. Then there was the case of the Rev Dr Robert Matton, who, like most ministers, never expected any problems to occur during his ministry and was subjected to injustices

from within his church. For further information about clergy 'burnout' we were directed to Lloyd Rediger's book, 'Clergy Killers'.

There were, fortunately, examples of cases which turned out more happily as a result of the advice and mediation which Unite had been able to provide. We heard about the proactive work undertaken by Unite to train individuals and groups within faith communities so that bullying behaviour and unrealistic expectations of a minister could be addressed before relationships broke down. In one instance Unite was able to help a minister who was covering seven churches on a Sunday to negotiate a revised work programme.

As we in our Unitarian movement look to the future and reflect on how we can support paid ministry we can find something of value in this lecture. It should encourage us to look at how well the systems and processes in our individual congregations support our ministers to minister and help us in turn provide ministry to them.

Michael Allured is a member of the Golders Green congregation.

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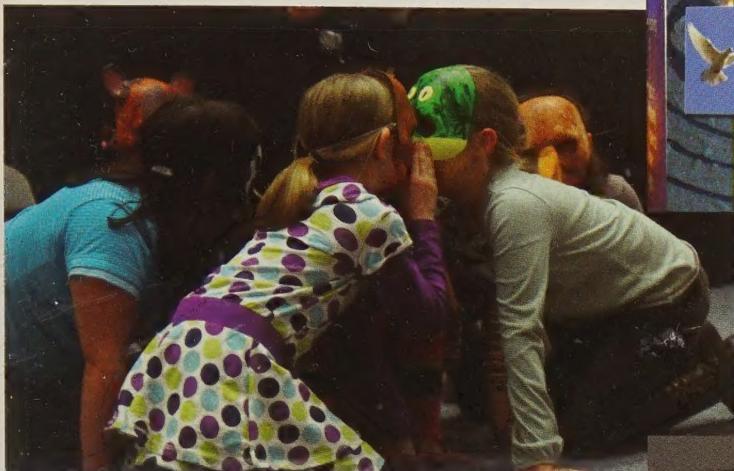
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GA 2009 Scrapbook



Photos by John Hewerdine

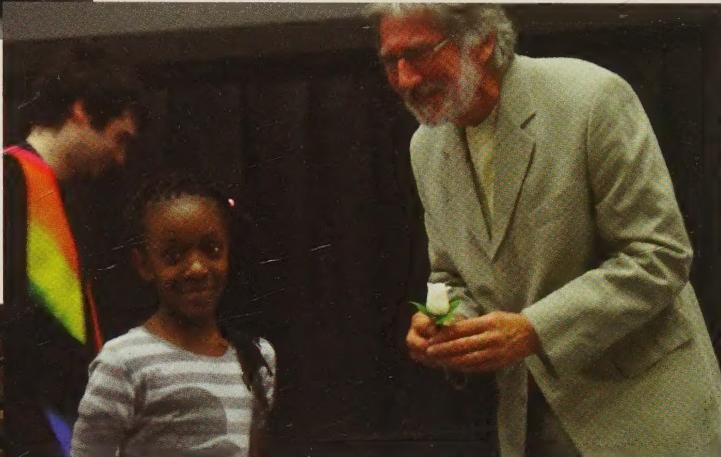
(above) Some of the children acted out Rumi's story of the mouse and the frog at the Anniversary Service.

The banners made their entrance at the opening service.

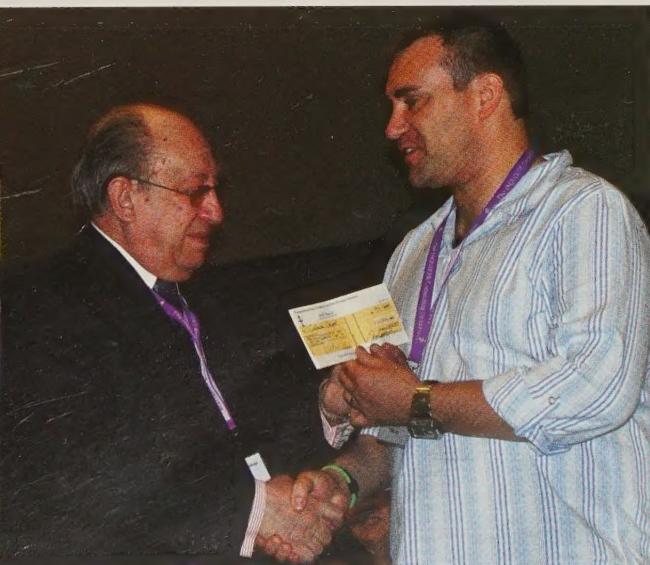


The new travelling display was on show in the Small Hall.

(photo below) At the Anniversary Service, one of the youngsters congratulated Lay Preacher Ray Seal on joining the roll of Lay Pastors.



(below left) (l-r) Marion Baker, Stella Burney, Annette Percy, Jane Howarth and Rosemary Ruston show off some gorgeous photographs of the Unitarian Nightingale Conference Centre and the surrounding Peak District.
(below right) GA Honorary Treasurer Martin West presented a cheque to Student Pastor Lewis Rees for the restoration of Gellionnen Chapel, which was vandalised in 2008.





General Assem



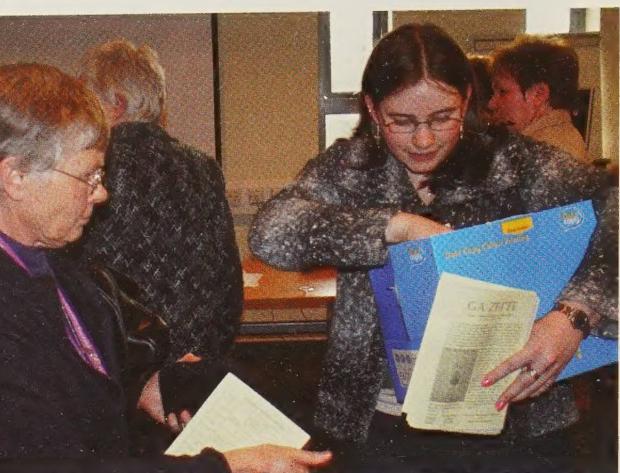
Meetings 2009

GA 2009 Scrapbook



(above) EC Member Dawn Buckle congratulated the Rev Dr Ann Peart on her retirement as principal at Unitarian College, Manchester.

(below) Chloe Brown, Rosina Harrison, Alice Haslam, Libby Podesta and Tom Podesta, members of the Urmston congregation, received their Gold Chalice Awards from GA president Joyce Ashworth. Alexandra Harrison received her bronze award.



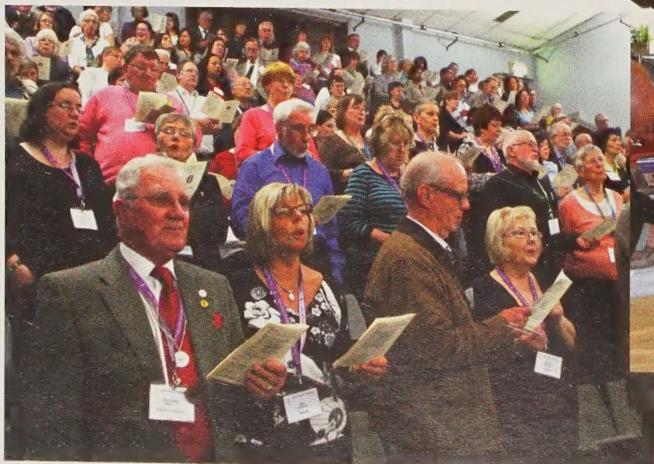
Kathy Faiers (right) edited the *GAzette* this year, and sold copies.

(photo below) Honorary Treasurer Martin West stepped down at the General Assembly meetings, but not before paying tribute to John Crosskey, who handles finances at Essex Hall.



(below right) Margaret Hamer (in red) had a look at what was on offer at the book stall.

(below left) Singing hymns as part of a large congregation is one of the pleasures of the GA.



Photos by John Hewerdine

Growth Day looked at what works



UU minister, the Rev Jane Dwinell, said congregations which want to grow should set numerical targets.

By Janet Briggs

Sir Peter Soulsby, convenor of the Executive Committee, opened the first session reminding us of our need to work to halt the numerical decline in our membership. This growth effort can only be done locally, by individual Unitarians and groups reaching out into the local community to attract and convince newcomers that here is an approach to faith with much to offer. He was followed by speakers from different parts of the country telling us what has worked well in their churches.

Michael Allured from Golders Green spoke of the importance of eating together. They offer monthly meditation sessions, with music, words and silence, candles and flowers, followed by a shared supper as well as a fortnightly lunch after the Sunday service. They have a team that includes their minister to cover pastoral concerns.

Sarah Boyce from Cardiff told us that they have no minister and share the premises of the local Quakers. Having no property to manage, they are free to devote attention to outreach and publicising themselves through their website and their notice board. They found the Congregational Assessment Process very helpful. It encouraged them to work together on a covenant, to take on more spiritual roles, and to improve their

management process.

Sue Woolley is part-time facilitator for the Midland District. She leads two services per month and is working with surveys and workshops to improve the notice boards and publicity in all the chapels in her district. She is proud to tell us the number of lay worship leaders now working in the Midlands has increased.

Margaret Robinson from Stockton spoke on behalf of Peter Whitham, who has produced a booklet of personal stories reflecting what being a Unitarian means to different people. He has organised displays at local shows, and at a University Freshers' Fair.

Lastly Jim Corrigall of Golders Green, a journalist and recent convert to Unitarianism, reminded us of the necessity of being always conscious of the newcomers and strangers in our midst, who may need direction, and who will feel insecure if things do not happen at the stated times. He has published accounts of visits to four churches where things are going well, and the membership rolls are growing, and a wonderful set of recommendations to assist any congregation that wonders how to grow.

The next session was all too short. The Rev Jane Dwinell, a small congregations expert from the US, told us some of the ideas contained in her book "Great Ideas for Small Congregations", which was on sale if you were quick enough. Every church should have at least one copy. Jane is practical and forthright – a pleasure to hear. She told us that three quarters of Unitarian Universalist congregations might be considered small, ranging from 150 down to half a dozen members meeting in someone's house, and that small need not mean failing. She emphasised that the only worthwhile reason for a congregation to grow is to extend the liberal religious message to more people. To do this, congregations must be consulted and a plan is required.

In the afternoon a third session invited people from different areas – in my case, Northern Britain – to share whatever was working in their home church or chapel. While we had a fine array of successes and a little advice, this was not a discussion, having no mention of the problems and objections that may have been encountered.

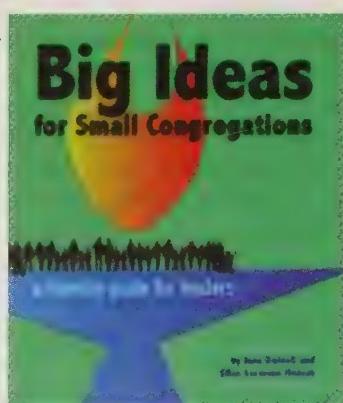
Janet Briggs is a member of the Glasgow congregation.



In part two of the growth sessions, participants broke into groups to exchange ideas. Photos by John Hewerdine

Small Talk, Big Ideas

Order the Rev Jane Dwinell's book for small congregations or sign up for her free e-mail newsletter at www.spiritoflifepublishing.com



Women's League fights meningitis

By Margaret Hill

The Women's League President, the Rev Penny Johnson welcomed a large number of members to the 101st AGM. The business proceeded efficiently, reports and accounts were accepted, votes of thanks were given to Penny and the officers, and to Judy Hague for producing the excellent and very readable anthology, *Centenary of the Women's League*. Lena Cockcroft brought greetings from the Northern Ireland Women's League, and Sheila Godfrey from the Adelaide branch.

Penny and Eunice Smith, the treasurer, handed over the 2008-9 project cheque for £11,000 to Russell Richards of SightSavers International – a truly magnificent effort by all members. Russell expressed his thanks for the generosity of the League, and said this could save the sight of over 600 people.

Penny thanked members of the Women's League for their warm and generous welcome, and the officers for their help during the year. Last year we celebrated 100 years, she urged



Mary Wightman

members to have passion, freshness, vitality and sparkle, as she wants the League to survive and progress. She installed Mary Wightman of the Scottish District as president, and Mary installed Dilys Evans of South East Wales as Vice-President.

Mary introduced the speaker Steve Dayman, chief executive of Meningitis UK, the League's fundraising project for 2009-10. Mr Dayman spoke of the loss of his baby son 27 years ago from the disease, and of how quickly the illness can kill. A vaccine has been available for Meningitis C since 1999, but its long-term effectiveness is not yet known, and is being studied. Funding of research into this and into finding a vaccine for Meningococcal group B is ongoing.

The vision and the mission of the charity is to find vaccines to eradicate Meningitis. More information can be found on the Meningitis UK website: www.meningitisUK.org

Mary closed the meeting with a hymn and the benediction.

Margaret Hill is editor of the Women's League Letter.

Psychical Society's inspirational talk

By Feargus O'Connor

The guest speaker at this year's Unitarian Society for Psychical Studies (USPS) meeting was its new President, Peter Underwood. A former publisher who has known such eminent writers as E.M. Forster, Somerset Maugham, Walter de la Mare and Dylan Thomas, the Life President of the Ghost Club and a long-time member of the Society for Psychical Research, Peter has been described by Dame Jean Conan Doyle, the daughter of the author, as 'the Sherlock Holmes of psychical research'.

Widely considered the world's leading authority on ghosts and the paranormal, Peter is the author of 46 books. He himself saw his first ghost, that of his father, at the age of 9 and during his childhood he lived in a haunted house. This aroused his lifelong interest in the paranormal. He went on to investigate many hauntings, including that of Borley Rectory, reputedly the 'most haunted house in England' and the subject of his latest book.

However, Peter decided to speak to us not of ghosts but of paranormal influences on the arts. In his fascinating and erudite talk he told us of numerous poets, novelists, artists and composers who claimed to have been creatively inspired, often in dreams. Among the famous writers who claimed to have been inspired in this way have been Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Dante, Milton, Blake, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Swinburne, Rossetti, Stevenson, Kipling, Yeats and Walter de la Mare.

Peter recalled a conversation with Walter de la Mare in which that writer spoke of his psychic experiences and of the 'waking dreams' which so often gave him ideas for his poems and stories. He also told us the story of the composition of Rudyard Kipling's novel 'Kim'. Kipling maintained that the novel 'wrote itself' and refused to take any credit for writing it. Feeling as if he were under a supernatural influence, he took care to 'walk delicately' lest the influence withdrew.

Kipling describes in his autobiography this strange experience and how he consciously felt the influence leave him as soon as he completed the last word of the manuscript.

Peter also recounted a conversation with Somerset Maugham in which the writer had modestly claimed that he had 'little imagination' and that he got his ideas from what he called 'revue', which he considered the source of his creative imagination. Maugham just opened his mind and 'let other influences take over'.

It is well known that Robert Louis Stevenson claimed that the inspiration for his story of the obsessed scientist Dr Jekyll and his evil alter ego Mr. Hyde came in a dream and that Mary Shelley conceived her story of *Frankenstein* in a flash of inspiration which she could not really rationally explain. Other writers who felt such inspiration were Bunyan and Hans Christian Anderson, who claimed that many of his stories came into his mind almost complete and he just had to write them down.

Peter also spoke of the claims of equally inexplicable inspirational influences on many artists, musicians, dancers and composers. He told us of paranormal occurrences, well documented, during the making of a film on Paganini and another on the ballerina Anna Pavlova and of the feverish inspired methods of such great composers as Mozart, Tchaikovsky and Handel.

During the composition of his great oratorio *Messiah*, Handel worked at such extraordinary speed he seemed in a trance. One day his servant found the composer at his work table after he had finished composing the Hallelujah Chorus. Handel's face had a look of ineffable bliss. Tears rolling down his face, he said: 'I did think I did see all Heaven before me and the great God Himself...'

The Rev Feargus O'Connor is minister at Golders Green.

Speed-dating at GA (No, not that kind)

By Martin Whitell

The very last non-Business event of the annual meetings was the 'District Speed Dating' just before dinner on Friday afternoon. Fifteen of the 16 districts were represented a superb 94% turnout! Fifty people participated.

Martin Whitell, minister at Portsmouth and co-ordinator for district support, introduced the session. The Executive Committee and headquarters team had done a great deal and achieved much over the past few years. Similarly congregations were working at growing their numbers and many were realising that growth. Sandwiched between these, however, were the districts, and now the spotlight would swing to them.

The entertaining "District Speed Dating" event was run by the Rev Cen Llwyd from South Wales. After consoling those who had hoped for a more romantic kind of dating, Cen grouped members of the same district together. Initially they had three or four minutes to write down a number of positive attributes related to their district. *Positive* was the key word! After this, the 15 groups were made into three groups of five and each group had one minute to share with the others the "up-side" of their district's activities. On the blowing of Cen's somewhat intermittent whistle the next district shared their story. The hubbub was deafening. Changes took place twice so that most people got to hear most of the summary of good enterprise in our districts.

Breathless, heads spinning but amazed the groups concluded and were delighted with the good things, the range of resources and ideas they had heard about. All the notes were collected and will be collated and circulated to the districts.

In the summer of 2008, the Denominational Support Commission ran a working group made up of experienced and new Unitarians, district supporters and others at Hucklow. The purpose was to look at the value, importance and contribution of our districts. The topics discussed ranged from viability on the



Groups were told to accentuate the positive when talking about their districts. Photo by John Hewerdine

one hand to vitality and vibrancy on the other. The outcome was overwhelming agreement that our districts do have a crucial part to play in the future of our movement in terms of enhanced communication between the EC/Essex Hall and the congregations. Additionally, they were best placed to further shared resources between themselves and to facilitate a greater quality of Unitarian activity locally. It was a case of restoring the shine, as well as installing new lights to our districts. Alison Thursfield and Sue Woolley from the Midland Unitarian Association will also be helping in the task which may take up to five years to complete.

There is the promise of more to come from the district support project in the next few months.

The Rev Martin Whitell is minister at Portsmouth.

Earth Spirit network celebrated transition

By Lyanne Mitchell

The Unitarian Earth Spirit Network (UESN) meeting was well attended. UESN Secretary David Arthur welcomed everyone with a short introduction about the network. The point was made that the word 'Unitarian' is often left out of our title by others –i.e. referred to as 'the Earth Spirit Network'. Our members are committed to being Unitarian first and foremost, albeit with an earth spirit / pagan interest and voice.

The meeting's theme was 'Moving On'. The new editor of the quarterly Unitarian Earth Spirit Network File is Liz Foxbrook, who lives in Sweden. She will be assisted by Tony McNeile. Lyanne Mitchell, retiring editor, gave a few words of 'farewell' – thanking all the regular writers for their support over a decade ... and asking that Liz should receive the same. She quoted Cynthia Dickinson, who once said that the network and the File should be allowed to grow *organically* – and it will, under new management.

Following this, a group of UESN members from Chester, gave us a simple and peaceful period of worship. UESN aims were read out from the back cover of the File: 'We are Unitarian Network of friends and fellow seekers who are linked

through a collaborative Network File. Through sharing our insights and beliefs, we aim to restore, inspire and encourage one another by: Revering the totality of the divine reality of nature being revealed to us through the infinite multiplicity of forms and forces; Evolving creative ways of worship, for body, mind and spirit; Affirming a Pagan spiritual perspective as being fully compatible with the human quest for self-knowledge and ultimate meaning ...'

This was followed by a selection of readings / extracts from various File issues over the years: 'Whisperer to the Breeze' and 'August is the Purple Time' by Betty McKellar; 'The pearl' by Linda Haggerstone; 'Spring' by Tony McNeile; 'Call me by my Real Name' by Thich Nhat Hanh, contributed by Lyanne Mitchell and and 'Song of Talieson', contributed by Christine Mackenzie.

The Four Directions were closed by the simple blessing – 'Peace, peace, peace, peace.'

The next UESN annual gathering will be at Great Hucklow, 4-6 September.

Lyanne Mitchell is a member of the Glasgow congregation.

Letters to the Editor

An agenda for the new Executive Committee

To the Editor:

In response to and with some reference to comments in the 'How is the GA doing?' issue of the Inquirer of 18 April, I list what I believe the new Executive Committee – after reading the comments for themselves – could very well want to be doing, and which surely must receive priority attention.

1. In co-operation with the District Associations (which may, or may not, consult with their constituent congregations), clarify what is the function of the EC by defining its aims. Then, present them before the denomination at a special general meeting of the Assembly, or, at the next General Assembly Meetings, for ratification.

(*Jim McClelland: '...little interaction between Districts and the EC.'*. *Louise Rogers: 'The EC needs to tell us what our plan is'*. *Cliff Reed: '...the system...has resulted in a move towards centralisation'*)

2. Within the context of these aims, decide whether the title of Chief Executive should be retained or whether the title of General Secretary would be more appropriate.

(*Jim McClelland: '... General Secretary better represents the relationship between the centre and the generality of the movement.'*)

Clearly define the role of the Chief Executive/General Secretary to ensure that candidates for the post clearly know what is required. (*Catherine Robinson: 'the sudden resignation of the Rev Steve Dick. Something has gone wrong. But what? Ernest Baker: '....the process...resulted in...the notion of a "messianic", chief executive.'*)

3. Establish criteria by which the work of the Executive Committee and of the Chief Executive/General Secretary will be assessed and evaluated.

(*This ought to avoid ad hoc comments that are too easily seen as hurtful criticisms. PW*)

4. Work with the commissions to set objectives related to the aims agreed, and allocate budgets. (*Louise Rogers: '...the EC... should have developed a strategic plan'*)

5. Report to the denomination every three months, or invite an *Inquirer*

reporter to be present at Executive Meetings. (*David Warhurst: '... consider ways and means of opening up its meetings. ...to the press'*, *Cliff Reed: '...there is little communication.'*)

6. Re Growth Initiative:

- i. Build upon the work already done and more fully implement the 2006 Growth Resolution by establishing a panel with the remit of promoting and monitoring numerical growth within the movement. (*Bill Darlison: 'I'm quite sure that 'growth' will be at the top of everybody's agenda...', and '...nobody seems to be bothered about observing some growing'*. *Kate Taylor: 'I'd love to know how the ground has 'been prepared for growth and renewal!'*)
- ii. Request that the Panel give consideration to the creation of new fellowships. (*Janet Briggs: 'I am inclined to think that the future lies in fellowships'*)

Peter Whitham

Stockton

Regard questions as friendly interest

To the Editor:

I was pleased to see the direct answers published in response to queries about the reaction of the rank-and-file to the experiments in constitution making that the movement is making. I feel that the post of 'chief executive' was an import from an inappropriate commercial model and a poor fit with an executive of hard-working elected volunteers and an experienced staff at Essex Hall.

In my view the monies would be better spent on a post for a person who would coordinate information of use to congregations who are keen to make the best practical use of their idealism, and a budget to fund expert help in national publicity campaigns.

I hope that in the second round of work by the executive committee there will be enough confidence in the wider community to regard questions about just what issues are being considered there as friendly interest rather than implicit criticism. I did exercise my vote, but would have liked to be better informed about what talents were currently going to be of most use to the committee when I cast it.

I look forward to further briefing about how the next phase of working proceeds and hope that *The Inquirer*

will be used as a vehicle for helping us to give realistic and informed support to suggested initiatives for congregational activity.

Betty Rathbone

Norwich

Take this opportunity to evaluate position

To the Editor:

May I express my gratitude to the Rev Steve Dick for all the energy and dedication he gave to the post of chief executive. I hope that our movement can take a long, honest look at the whole profile of this role. Firstly I believe we need to rethink the job title. I remember being very uneasy right from the start when the new title 'Chief Executive' was unveiled – surely such a title may be appropriate for the boss of a multinational company, but is it suitable for a small religious charity? Also, I wonder whether the job description of the present post is an unrealistic brief for *any* individual to take on? I can see at least three vast areas of skills and abilities required by this job: a spokesperson to speak on behalf of our organisation and to engage with the media, faith bodies and government, a manager to lead and support the staff at Essex Hall and an advisor for our congregations, a kind of civil servant whose area of expertise is in charity law and the ancient art of trusteeship.

There are probably more aspects of this multi-faceted post I haven't even touched on. Perhaps we need to clarify what kinds of leadership we need and then recruit a team of key players, paid and voluntary, to help us rediscover our shared voice of non-creedal, free religious exploration, a language of faith this nation is crying out for.

The Rev John Harley

GA Youth Coordinator

'Chief executive' is the wrong title

Having read 'How is the G.A. doing?' (18 April, *Inquirer*) I would say not very well. If the chief executive suddenly resigns, surely the members of our movement need to know why. It is perfectly possible that the Rev Steve Dick found the post didn't suit his particular talents. It may be that the executive committee found that Steve

Letters to the Editor

Dick didn't meet their expectations for that special post. These situations happen all the time, in all sorts of jobs. Then the person resigns, a new person is appointed and everyone moves on. No shame on anyone.

However, in order that the mistake is not repeated, it is in everyone's interests that the facts are not swept under the carpet. In fact, I agree with Jim McClelland. The title chief executive is wrong. We are not a business organisation. We need a general secretary at Essex Hall and perhaps a different person to be the public face of our denomination. We need someone to raise our profile and be competent to deal with the media in all its many forms.

Wilna Roberts

Sevenoaks

Time for everyone to 'Sing Your Faith'

To the Editor:

Thanks to the Rev Ant Howe for the inspired review of the new purple hymn book (*4 April, Inquirer*).

We have invited members of our congregation to sponsor individual copies – at £10 this is very good value for money – and had a heart-warming response – anniversaries, past members, even a 19th century chapel secretary has been commemorated! There are numerous musical anniversaries this year – Haydn, Handel, Mendelssohn and Purcell – not forgetting our own David Dawson, who turns 70.

Fifty of the new hymns are available on 2 CDs (£15 plus p+p from dcdawson3@hotmail.com) to assist congregations which don't have organists.

'Sing Your Faith' is a wonderful achievement – thanks again to the hymn book panel for all their hard work!

Adrienne Wilson

Godalming Unitarians

An 'uplifting' time at the GA meetings?

Even though I'm an old-timer to the Unitarian Movement, I was a first-timer to the GA Annual Meetings at Chester. I found most of my stay there uplifting – until an experience on the final morning which was 'up-lifting' in a different sense.

After breakfast on Saturday I returned

Honorary treasurer offers thanks for gifts

To the Editor:

Many, many thanks to all the individuals and congregations that gave so generously to my retiring present. The presentation by GA Vice President Neville Kenyon at the 'Abba' evening at the GA meetings was overwhelming.

For those people who were not there, I was given a painting of Conway castle from across the Conway by one of my favourite artists, James

Longueville. I was also given a very significant cheque. You know how I like 'Money, Money, Money!' (with apologies to Abba)

I have enjoyed putting back into the Unitarian movement some small efforts to recognise the enormous benefits I have received over the years from being a member of such an interesting !! movement.

Again, I thank you all. It is very nice to be appreciated.

Martin G West

Former honorary treasurer, Unitarian General Assembly



to my fourth-floor room in Old College to obey the directive that all belongings should be removed from rooms before the start of the business session. I collected my suitcase and entered the lift, pressing the button for the basement. I was cutting things fine so I was a little annoyed when the lift went up instead of down. I assumed that this was in response to a call from above – in the literal sense – but the lift remained closed at the fifth floor where it stubbornly decided to stay, ignoring my efforts to make it descend or allow me to escape from its clutches.

My initial, momentary, reaction was, as a true Unitarian, one of *disbelief*, but I quickly realised that it had indeed happened and I would have to do something about it. I pressed the alarm button, and waited. Nothing happened – so I rang the alarm again, this time for longer: Still no joy.

Surely someone must have heard it? Receptionist ... cleaners... *anyone...* But no – the building must be empty! If I hoped to be released I would have to attract the attention of a passer-by. I pressed the alarm button again and kept it ringing continuously. The volume of sound was deafening – rivalling that of the 'Abba' tribute on Thursday night – it *must* have been audible all over the campus, but still no-one came.

Then, after an hour-and-a-quarter of captivity, I heard a shout of, 'Are you

alright in there?' from outside the lift. Much relieved, I shouted back that I was OK. Two security guards from another building had heard the alarm and set about tracing its source – not knowing whether it was for a fire, burglary, or whatever, and uncertain of its location because the sound was bouncing off other buildings. They eventually tracked it (and me) down and, once a key was obtained, my incarceration was over.

In the 'Growth Session' on the previous day we had been encouraged to compose a snappy 'conversation piece' outlining our Unitarian faith, in readiness for quick delivery in a brief interval of time, such as, say, the duration of a lift journey. How ironic that I had the speech, had the lift, had *more than enough* time ... but lacked the vital ingredient – someone to appreciate my eloquence.

Fortunately, I am of a sturdy constitution and suffered no ill-effects from my experience – I can look back at it and laugh. However, someone of a more delicate nature might not have fared so well. I would have thought it expedient on the part of the university to have some sort of visual display pinpointing the location of an alarm call, and possibly giving an indication of its nature.

Ken Morgan

Cefncoedcymru

News in brief

Longtime GA stalwart is honoured

Margaret Evans received a rousing round of applause at the General Assembly meetings in honour of the fact that she attended her first GA meeting in 1948 in London when she was president of the Cardiganshire Women's League. She has missed three somewhere in between but has attended almost 60 Assemblies.

She was born in Northern Ireland where her father, the Rev SE Bowen, was minister at Crumlin for 21 years before moving to take charge of three congregations in Cardiganshire, Allyblacca, Capel y Bryn and Cwmsychbant in 1929. For many years, she was the National Secretary of the Women's League and is still active in church and District activities. She is a member of Cardiff Unitarians, having been secretary of the Congregation for many years.

— The Rev Eric Jones



Global Chalice Lighting

The International Council of Unitarians and Universalists announces the 69th in its monthly series of global chalice lighting readings. Every month, a reading is distributed to Unitarian and Universalist congregations around the world. Each congregation is asked to use the reading for one worship service in the designated month, identifying it as the 'Global Chalice Lighting' for that month and naming the group which submitted it. This Global Chalice Lighting is to be used during May 2009.

The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao;

The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.

**The unnamable is the eternally real.
Naming is the origin of all particular things.**

**Free from desire, you realize the mystery.
Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.**

Yet mystery and manifestations arise from the same source.

**This source is called Mystery.
Mystery within Mystery,
The gateway to all understanding.**

**Chapter 1, Tao Te Ching
by Lao-tzu**

Modified from a translation by S. Mitchell
Spiritual Seekers Society, Hong Kong
<http://ssshk.tripod.com>



Two Revs and a cat and a dog ...

The Revs Alex Bradley and Jean McNeile toasted their recent engagement at a reception at the General Assembly meetings. They plan to get married on 22 August at Norcliffe Chapel, Styall, Cheshire.

Jean's family comes from Cheshire and her daughter lives in Knutsford, where Alex lives. Alex is minister at Knutsford and Styall and Jean recently resigned as minister at Padtham. For both Jean and Alex there is cause for a second celebration. Alex has just been appointed as the principal of Unitarian College, Manchester. Dog and cat diplomacy continues.

92nd annual conference at HMC Oxford

All ministers, students for the ministry, lay pastors, lay leaders, and their partners are invited to attend the 92nd Annual Conference to be held at Harris Manchester College, Oxford from 4pm Monday, 22 June to 1pm Wednesday, 24 June. Anyone who did not train at the college is welcome to attend all the meetings, except the annual business meeting. The cost will be £70, plus a small conference fee of £20. This year our theme is "Engaging with Religious Education in Ministry." Speakers will include the Rev Jim Robinson and the Rev David Usher.

— The Rev Penny Johnson

Harris Manchester College
Oxford

ANNUAL MEETING OF
FRIENDS
and
HONORARY GOVERNORS

Tuesday 23rd June 2009

12 noon Reception

12.30pm Lunch

3.00pm Lecture: "Charles Darwin"

Speaker: Professor Peter Harrison

4.00pm Tea

5.00pm Friends and Hon Governors Service

Please inform the Bursary by June 15th if you wish to attend the Lunch

01865 271006 or email: conferences@hmc.ox.ac.uk